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THE SOURCE OF THE IMMEDIATE PLOT OF *FAIRE EM*

The numerous references and suggestions, that the plot of the *Faire Em* story was founded upon a ballad, seemed to me plausible enough to warrant an investigation. The first intimation I received that such a theory was current as an explanation, I found in C. F. T. Brooke's *The Tudor Drama*, p. 272. This hint led to a closer search, with the result that I present the following discussion of a ballad, which critical study convinces me will solve the difficulty and explain away all allegorical suppositions. The simple means of borrowing, so general among the dramatists of the time, will shake the elaborate theories formerly presented (see Brooke, *Shakespeare Apocrypha*, Introduction). I shall confine myself to the presentation of statements in harmony with my own views. Mr. J. C. Collins, in his *Plays and Poems of Greene*, Vol. II, 4, has this to say,—“Now, part of the plot of *Faire Em* is probably founded on a ballad licensed to Henry Carré. March 2, 1580–1, under the title of ‘The Miller’s Daughter of Manchester.’” Here Collins hit the right note, but the wrong ballad. Greene, in his *Farewell to Folly*, 1591, ridicules our author—“but if they come to write or publish anything in print, it is either distilled out of ballets, or borrowed of Theological poets,” etc., adding, that the dramatist is ashamed of his source and thus gives his play a new color and a very new title (R. Simpson's *School of Shakespeare*, Vol. II, p. 377). From this it must be inferred that the source was a ballad, but not “The Miller’s Daughter of Manchester” as Mr. Collins recently suggested. The exact copy of the title would rather suggest that this particular ballad was drawn from the play and not *vice versa*. That it was customary so to retell the story of drama is proven by the ballad upon Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. If this could be proved, it would place the date of *Faire Em*, first acted, in 1580–1.

The correct ballad source, however, is *Bessie off Bednall*, printed in the *Percy Folio Ms.*,

Vol. II, p. 279. Later versions are entitled *The Blind Beggar's Daughter of Bednal-Green*. The exact date of this ballad is not known, we can do nothing more than state the evidence of scholars. There is little doubt but that it was very popular in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Internal evidence of the Percy ballad would show that date, besides, the following quotations are sufficient proof to sustain the early composition. W. Chappell, in the *Roxburghe Ballads*, Vol. I, writes—“The earliest extant copy is perhaps that in the Percy folio, the printed broad sides being chiefly of the date of Charles the 2nd, or later.” In his *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, pp. 159–60, we find this ballad listed among those of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Again, to quote Hall—“The ballad was certainly not written later than Queen Elizabeth's reign; for, as Percy points out, Mary Ambree was sung to the tune of it” (*Percy Folio Ms.*, Vol. II, p. 279). This is evidence enough to show the ballad was current at a time in which it could serve as a source; if we do not possess the particular version, at least we know the oldest version will conform closely to the Percy, inasmuch as little deviation is apparent in the broadside copies.

This story is the account which will serve as a digest of any one of the ballad versions. Bessye, supposedly of poor parentage, leaves home to dwell at the Queen's Arms, Rumford. Her virtues and great beauty win her many lovers. Among them we find four suitors, in reality three, each representative of a class in English society, seeking her love. They are a rich London merchant; a gentleman of good degree; a Knight; a landlady's son. The first three lovers ask her to become a bride, enumerating what each has to offer in keeping with her beauty. The landlady's son does not seem to be taken seriously, as no mention is made of a direct proposal. Our pretty Bessye seeks a faithful lover. She accordingly refers their suit to her father, the Blind Beggar of Bednall Greene. This announcement causes dismay and desertion on the part of the suitors, excepting the loyal knight. He will have her “hap better or worssse.” Consequently, Bessye and her lover set out to visit the blind old man.

Pursued but rescued, they meet the old father, who blessed the young people and ultimately gave them gold "thousands 3." The second part of the ballad opens with a wedding feast among the nobles of the country. During this mirth the blind beggar arrives in the guise of a minstrel, who, after singing a few songs, suddenly glorifies the name of the bride. He tells of her beauty, the kindness of her heart and finally the story of her birth. She is of noble blood, the daughter of "young Mountford of a highe degree;" a knight forced by war to live in retirement and in secret.

In the play the incidents are of necessity entirely changed, as that was the object of the dramatist; still, even a superficial reading will hardly fail to impress upon the reader the exact similarity of structure. This is due to the fact that the outline, the framework of the ballad, was incorporated intact. Read the modernized version of the ballad, printed in the Oxford ballad book and any edition of the play and you will find the following basis. Father and daughter disguised and poor, in reality noble and wealthy. The maid a celebrated beauty attracting many lovers and in particular three earnest suitors, with a fourth of little consideration. Each man is the representative of a class. The real quality of the lovers is shown by a test involving blindness, which does not weaken the ardor of the noble knight who wins the lady. When it is known the conditions were only a test the other suitors are always disappointed and angry. The final scene before royalty disclosed the identity of father and daughter.

The only suggestion of similarity of incident which I could discover is found in the episode where the knight fights for his lady love, just as they arrive before the Blind Beggar's hovel. This seems to suggest the short scene of conflict between Valingford and Manville. The real test of my assertions is found in comparison of the principal characters. Though the dramatist is condemned as a character-portrayer, we must admire him for the ability he displayed in developing his men as the ballad suggests. Working from a single line of the song he presents character contrasts of inner

nature. It is true, we find only in a general way a likeness between the Beggar and the Miller. A change of condition and surroundings would answer for all differences in two men who are valiant knights that live only for their pretty daughter. As for the two girls, it is hardly worth while to enter a detailed comparison. Let it suffice that they are "dainty, neuer to coye," blithe bonny lasses who seek faithfulness in love and are devoted to their father. In the ballad the landlady's son swears fidelity, yet is not represented among the three suitors who make a formal offer of marriage. An excellent youth "who swore he wold dye ffor pretty Bessye!" (l. 48). The consideration shown him, besides this sentence, seem to indicate the fool and braggart. Evidently he imagines himself another Sir Tophas, whom the dramatist so depicts in the person of Trotter. The gentleman exclaims thus—"My hart lyes distressed; O helpe me" (l. 56), which is again re-echoed in Mountney's asking Em to find "such kinde remorse as naturally you are enclined to" for my affection. The greater unknown Lord Valingford expresses hope and good faith throughout the play in accord with the ballad reading, "And if thou wilt wedd with me—" (l. 49), the words of the disguised knight. On the other hand, "Let me bee thy husband! the Merchant cold say" (l. 57) sums up the attitude of the wavering merchant's son Manville. This shows a lack of feeling so evident in Em's lover, for he has no difficulty in turning to another girl. Throughout the play his actions prove he thinks he is making a very great sacrifice to marry the lovely maid. He is in reality indifferent, that is to say, cold, for he can "so finely shift his matters off." In connection with this character, we notice a manifest copying of words in the expression used to indicate his change of feeling. In the ballad he retracts with this exclamation, "Nay then, thou art not for mee!" (l. 77), in the play—"Both blind and deafe! Then is she no wife for me."

Such actions and expressions are not the work of chance. When you read a man's character at this critical period of life you have his nature exposed. If he dissembles, you may be

sure he will do so many times; if he commands a proposal, he has an abundance of vanity to protect him from really loving a woman; if his words are couched in terms of consideration and feeling, a woman will find in him a man worthy of her regard. Our dramatist was fortunate in finding the ballad touching this weighty question, for he received his characters sharply defined.

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THE METAMORPHOSES IN *MUIOPOTMOS*

Most of the discussion concerning *Muiopotmos* has centered around the question of whether or not it is an allegory. The prevailing opinion is that it is a mock-heroic, and contains no hidden meaning. In the light of all obtainable evidence this view seems to be correct. Even with this problem dismissed or regarded as settled, however, the question of sources arises. Allegorical or mock-heroic, the framework of *Muiopotmos* remains to be accounted for. Dr. Nadal has established the strong presumption that Spenser was here writing under the influence of Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and *The Nun's Priest's Tale*.¹ This influence seems rather pervasive than particular, a reminiscence of spirit rather than of plot. Granting this influence, I wish further to point out Spenser's use of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Upon analysis *Muiopotmos* divides itself into the six following parts:

1. Introduction ("I sing of deadly dolorous debate") and Invocation ("Vouchsafe, O thou the mournfulst Muse of nyne"), 1-16.

2. Description of Clarion as the ideal young knight and his arming, 17-112.

3. Metamorphosis of Venus' nymph, Astery, into a butterfly, 113-144.

¹ T. W. Nadal, "Spenser's *Muiopotmos* in Relation to Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and *The Nun's Priest's Tale*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, xxv, 640 f.

4. Clarion's journey and arrival at the 'gay gardens,' 145-256.

5. Metamorphosis of Arachne into a spider, 257-352.

6. Clarion's capture in Aragnoll's web and death at his hands, 353-440.

It is with the two metamorphoses, numbers three and five, that we shall be chiefly concerned. The action of the rest of the poem can be told in a sentence: Clarion, son of Muscaroll and descendant of the butterfly nymph Astery, arms himself and journeys to a beautiful garden, where he is caught and slain by his hereditary foe, Aragnoll, descendant of the spider-changed Arachne. That is the entire plot, if so slight a narrative nucleus may be called a plot. Spenser takes 312 lines to relate it, proceeding by his favorite method of stringing a succession of stanza pictures on his narrative thread.

The most interesting part of the poem is the use made of the two incidental metamorphoses to give a motive to the hatred of Aragnoll, the spider, for Clarion, the butterfly.

The starting point of the whole seems to be the Arachne Metamorphosis² of Ovid, VI, i. This is the account of Arachne's being transformed by Minerva into a spider as punishment for presuming to pit her skill against that of the goddess in a weaving contest.³ Spenser takes the story as told by Ovid, shortens it greatly, and alters it freely to serve his purpose of linking the fortunes of spider and butterfly. This is accomplished as follows: In Ovid, it will be recalled, after Minerva has displayed her skill by embroidering her contest with Neptune over Athens, Arachne fills her web with subjects designedly chosen to exhibit the failings and errors of the gods. Twenty-one amours in the lives of Jupiter, Neptune,

² Arachne is also referred to in *The Faerie Queene*, II, xii, 77.

³ Palgrave (Grosart's *Spenser*, IV-LXXI) is seemingly unaware of this obvious source. He doubtfully refers the poem to the Ariadne picture in *The Nuptials of Thetis and Peleus* of Catullus. He is, however, not satisfied with their connection, and speaks of it as "fantastically slight." Careful examination fails to reveal any trace of Catullus in *Muiopotmos*.